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ABSTRACT

Technical or professional writing classes may be enhanced through real-world writing assignments. Social-service agencies prove to be most agreeable and enthusiastic about working with students on various projects because they have limited--sometimes diminishing--financial support. In addition, most charities are accustomed to working with volunteers and coordinating their efforts with paid staff, so the transition to working with college students is an easy one. Students at Oakland Community College have successfully written for the United Way, local small businesses, and the college's fund raising department and recruitment office. One of these writing projects was designed in cooperation with PATH, a social service agency designed to help homeless women by helping them obtain education, training, a job, and finally a car, through the organization's no-interest loan program. The project required students to analyze and redesign various PATH documents; in most cases they found them deficient in visual appeal, clarity, tone, diction and readability. An administrator at PATH later called the instructor to explain that her organization had chosen one of the packages prepared by a student group to be used by all of the women who will participate in the program. Individual comments from students show that they found the project worthwhile and necessary. (TB)

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ED 377 489

CASE WORK FOR TECHNICAL WRITING STUDENTS

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This paper discusses breaking down barriers between school and community in order to motivate student writers and enhance learning. Community-college writing students, working with social-service organizations, write documents that fulfill real needs, and that have "real people"--that is, not the teacher--as audience.

OVERVIEW

I teach two community-college professional writing classes, Business Writing and Technical Writing. In both fifteen-week classes, I find a wide range of student interests and abilities. Many students pursue training in the medical, engineering, marketing, and accounting fields; few admit to desires for careers in the humanities.

Yet, most of these students' literacy training has been historically academic, with the majority of their required readings, textbooks, and assignments possessing a clear literary orientation. These students largely assume that community-college writing will occur primarily in the English class, that the prompts for this writing result from textbook or teacher dictates, that the audience for their writing--while occasionally including other classmates--usually is the writing teacher, and finally, that the only real-world significance of the writing they produce is the grade awarded by that teacher. In other words, if their writing assignments and grade have any relevance to life outside the college, it is in the completion of degree requirements that will hopefully lead them to a meaningful and well-compensated engagement with reality.

Rarely, then, is the community-college student challenged to write within a real-world context. In the assignment I'll discuss in this paper, however, my students encounter a Pontiac, Michigan world of unemployment, child and spouse abuse, violence, drugs, and poverty. Also, they find an organization whose mission is to help the women and children who have been society's victims live in safety, and develop "economic autonomy, self-esteem, self-sufficiency, and a functional family unit." The writing class activities in this project we do for Pontiac Area Transitional Housing replace neat end-of-chapter questions and XYZ Company simulations. Instead, we work with the amorphous "need" of a deserving urban audience, an audience--unlike the teacher audience for student writing--that views writing not as a burdensome but necessary part

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of the job, but as something that offers help and escape.

This assignment is real-world writing. It is case work, or requiring student writers to produce documents for application in the larger context of the community. After we have discussed textbook chapters, written brief--and sometimes predictable--papers, students work as writers outside academia.

This jumping from the four classroom walls to Pontiac's "mean streets" requires adjustments and flexibility from both the students and their instructor. However, in the past five years, we have adjusted to these unique demands. My classes have successfully written for several organizations and individuals, including:

- United Way
- local small businesses
- the college's fund raising department and recruitment office, and
- specific social service or charitable organizations, including P.A.T.H.

Social-service agencies prove to be the most agreeable and enthusiastic about working with my students in a writing project. I think I know why: These charities daily encounter great community need, but have limited--sometimes diminishing--financial support. In addition, most charities are used to working with volunteers and coordinating their efforts with paid staff, so the transition to their working with college students is an easy one. Finally, writing ability, and the time to focus on writing tasks, can be scarce in any organization, but possibly more so in one with enormous, urgent demands and limited staff.

In short, the real-world writing assignment offers the professional writing student an opportunity to do something different: to analyze a specific workplace's writing needs, to put their conceptual knowledge to work creating and revising documents used in that workplace, to get critical feedback from this non-academic audience, and to see their writing function outside academia.

This paper details a workplace writing assignment as my class worked with Pontiac Area Transitional Housing during a recent college term. I'll show you original documents, student revisions, as well as a sampling of these students' feelings about this assignment. Finally, I'll summarize some special rewards and difficulties experienced by the students and me. But first, I'd like to discuss briefly some literature that relates to assigning workplace writing in an academic setting.

SOME RELATED LITERATURE

Incorporating this type of assignment in a writing class has precedent and is discussed in various forms in the literature of language arts and education. George Hillocks, in a 1986 metastudy of writing instructional methods, found that the inquiry method, in which students "learn how to generate information, analyze it, and plan how to use it" is an effective mode of writing instruction (231). Additionally, Hillocks quotes a survey of writing done by Applebee finding "In the better lessons . . . students were faced with problems that had to be solved out of

their own intellectual and experiential resources . . . The students could offer legitimate solutions of their own rather than discover a solution the teacher had already devised" (225).

Steve Bernhardt, in his recounting of major points made in fforum, a collection of essays on learning to write collected by Patricia Stock and the University of Michigan, emphasized that writing instructors' "efforts must be directed toward helping students discover and respond to meaningful contexts of language use" (324). Elsewhere, Bernhardt adds that commendable composition instruction requires "a full rhetorical context that considers purpose and audience," (132), and that "in the best rhetorical world, our students would be writing not within contrived situations but real ones . . . . Writing would count, it would matter, it would change the world" (330).

Additionally, discussions of research methods in language arts argue for some advantages of a case study approach over a more quantitative one: Birnbaum and Emig characterize case studies as having a "real-life context" (195) and "immediacy" (201), by implication, qualities that other modes of research might not share. While this discussion of research methods is aimed at academics and practitioners, might the same descriptors characterize our students "researching" the application of writing in a non-academic setting and subsequently, revising documents to fit the workplace's needs? Both the mode--the instructional process itself--as well as the concepts of situation seem to justify taking student writing outside the classroom.

Finally, there is the idea that this type of assignment, especially writing for social service agencies, might reinforce students' feelings that they and writing have a meaningful place in the larger world outside the classroom. The students experience "service learning" in that they learn where they and their writing "fit into the larger scheme of things," (Mayer 116) and that they renegotiate school/community coexistence into a recognizance of common purposes and objectives (Fertman 60).

The literature seems to support this type of assignment, but how does the assignment look in practice? What type of changes did students make in the existing documents? How did all participants--the personnel of the charitable organization, the students, and their teacher--react to this assignment in workplace writing? It's time to look at this assignment in detail.

INITIATING THE WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Initially, I served on a United Way allocations committee, which not only fulfilled my sense of serving the community, but enabled me to make contacts within the network of charitable organizations within the larger community.

My role on the allocations committee required me to listen and judge these organizations as they regularly requested funding and justify expenditures. As I participated as a good citizen on one level, I thought on an additional level, that of a writing instructor searching for potentially-good writing experiences for his students. After one allocations meeting, I initiated the contact with P.A.T.H.

The Executive Director of P.A.T.H., Dorothy Pfaff, soon met me for lunch. We

discussed her organization's writing needs and what my class could contribute. Soon, Ms. Pfaff visited my class and explained P.A.T.H. In brief, what she told my students included the following:

•The organization addresses itself to homelessness,

•It takes women and their children into a secure, motivating environment,

•They require the residents to pursue job training or education, and

•The residents can pass "The Final Hurdle," --obtaining a no-interest $3000 car loan through P.A.T.H.--which will enable them to leave the group residence, find and keep a job, and attain additional independence.

Ms. Pfaff had in mind our class' working on this last project, "The Final Hurdle," which challenged the residents' literacy: They had to read, comprehend, and complete several related forms, written by various volunteers, and combining the worst features of old insurance policies and outdated linguistics textbooks. She requested that we rewrite them in a more "readable, unified, usable" form. I saw this project as one my class members, by applying the concepts of good professional writing, could do well.

The students worked in groups of three, which required some discussion of collaborative guidelines preliminary to anything else. Every student had a Macintosh with ClarisWorks; PageMaker was also available, as was a laser printer. Additionally, I required each group to prepare a list of objectives for this project as well as to write their feelings about this assignment as preliminary activities.

Some student comments prior to their revising the Final Hurdle documents included:

I think the forms that are currently being used by the PATH organization are in drastic need of rewording and redesigning. It is clear that most of the work was done on a word processor and was not well thought out. My group will do the best we can to reconstruct the forms and literature so that it is easy to read and easy to fill out. (Amy F.)

I personally feel that the PATH organization is a great idea, and I will be happy to help out with this assignment. I know that most of the people that are being helped . . . are not college level readers, I can see where a problem can arise with PATH literature. I found it hard myself to understand a lot of the information! (Dan. K.)

I also like the idea that the documents that we will ultimately produce will benefit others. . . . Teamwork is especially helpful in this type of project because there are numerous steps and different situations that have to be redone. One person might be good at the graphing portion and another might be good at the wording and the set up. (Sandra J.)

Many people think of this as a waste of time, but I would rather be writing a paper that will help the community than writing a paper that will just get graded and thrown into the circular file. I really appreciate you giving us a chance to help and trusting our work. Thanks! (Tia B.)

I want to be able to do a good job for this organization. . . . I want Dorothy Pfaff to be so impressed with our booklet that she chooses to use our groups formats. . .it will be good for us

because it will allow us to experience first hand that another audience will read our work. (Kathleen K.)

All the students' preliminary attitudes were not positive, but most were. Many mentioned as positive features the need for collaboration, the desirability of helping a worthwhile cause, and the chance to write for a non-academic, real-world audience. Most negative comments reflected a fear of too-much work. Frequently, students mentioned readability, audience, and document design--all concepts that we had previously studied.

The student groups then opened the original documents, and began applying their expertise developed earlier in the class.

THE DOCUMENTS

I've duplicated one of the Final Hurdle documents here:

APPLICANT'S PROCEDURES
PATH'S
FINAL HURDLE PROGRAM

1. Enroll and attend all "Car Buying" series of four classes plus two on Final Hurdle

2. Meet with Case Manager to receive budget information form and program guidelines.

3. Research the used cars available and contact Final Hurdle mechanic to arrange for inspection

4. Contact auto insurance agent and obtain proof of insurance document

5. Meet with Program Director : present car title and insurance documents; 10% down payment money order; AET emission test results.

6. Complete all loan and promissory note applications.

7. PATH will be indicated on title as lien holder.

8. Check issued to previous owner of vehicle

9. Repayment schedule begins in month following as indicated on promissory note

10. Refer to Final Hurdle Guidelines for ongoing follow-up process.

HAPPY MOTORING **DRIVE SAFELY**

In analyzing this and the other eight pages of original P.A.T.H. documents, students found deficiencies in visual appeal, clarity, diction, tone, and readability. Some ways groups revised these documents included:

•Organizing the documents into a more logical sequence,

•Eliminating extra words and replacing or defining difficult ones,
•Adding transitions, overviews, and summaries,
•Incorporating the documents into a "package" of similarly-designed pages,
•Adding graphics and color,
•Binding the pages into a tabbed package, and
•Utilizing checklists.

Overall, most groups applied multiple revisions that reflected mature thinking about text, readability, and visual appeal--concepts that professional writing students should be comfortable with.

I collected their packages and sent them to P.A.T.H. Several weeks later, Ms. Pfaff replied that P.A.T.H. had chosen one student package, and that "the packet will be utilized by all the women who are preparing to participate in the Final Hurdle project." I subsequently notified the three students who wrote the most usable packet; I encouraged these three to mention this collaborative writing in a meaningful context as they rewrite their resumes.

SOME OUTCOMES

Overall, these writing students applied some conventional writing concepts in a "real-world" situation that brought out the best the students, their instructor, and writing instruction. Most collaborated well, created magnificently, researched thoroughly, and produced by a deadline. Their awareness of a real audience and this audience's genuine need for their product as part of a realistic context motivated them to produce quality work. I don't think that a more-conventional class curriculum--i.e., read the book, discuss, write in response to a textbook situation, have a test--would have approached our P.A.T.H. experience as an ideal environment for learning writing. One student, Sandra, remarked later that "Knowing these documents will be put to use makes redoing the documents so much more of an adventure. It motivates you to do the best that you can because such a vast number of people will be viewing these documents on a daily basis. I am honored to have been able to work on this project . . . ."
And so was I.

Most students agreed with Sandra and me. I'd now like to conclude with a brief list summarizing some additional advantages of students' writing for social service agencies:

•It builds ivory tower/community awareness.
•It develops community respect for the college.
•It shows students that literacy has a place in the real world.
•It puts good minds together to solve society's problems.

And, here is a brief list of disadvantages:

•The instructor can't teach from old lesson plans or textbook exercises.
•The students and their teacher must stay flexible. (There is no way to plan for every eventuality and urgent writing need.)

•The instructor gives up some control.

•Group work results in occasional grievances.

•Computers are necessary.

•The instructor must be accountable to the business community for student performance.

I think that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. Writing for outside agencies is so rewarding that I continue to schedule future college/community collaboration, including:

•Direct-mail letters for United Way,

•Grant applications for P.A.T.H., and

•Building (accessibility) analyses for the college.

As usual, we'll continue to utilize the writing opportunities available in the life of the community around us, and thus grow as writers and people.

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BIOSKETCH

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